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Funding sought for levee repairs

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LOGAN

There may be more cooperation now on rebuilding a levee system protecting northern Gloucester County from Delaware River floodwaters, but two local mayors remain adamant that their small communities can't pay for it alone.

That was the message to emerge from a meeting of Gloucester County mayors held in Logan Tuesday night.

Freeholder-Director Stephen Sweeney said he will meet with Mayors George Shivery Jr. of Greenwich and Frank Minor of Logan, who represent the townships most at risk, within two weeks to discuss signing an agreement related to the 4.5-mile levee's southernmost floodgate, which is severely deteriorated.

The state will contribute \$2.25 million to the project, but that's \$750,000 shy of what's needed to do the job. The county's Improvement Authority will front the money to get the repairs started, but only if it eventually is repaid, Sweeney said. Under the proposed agreement, Greenwich and Logan would pay the \$750,000 if the state refused to fund the project's full cost.

Sweeney, who is also a state senator, said delaying the project further will drive costs up. He believes the area's state legislators can make a strong case for full state funding. Such assurances don't ease Shivery's mind.

The townships can't afford a \$750,000 expense even if they work together, he said. Shivery is also worried that if Greenwich and Logan sign such an agreement, it might set a precedent that would make them financially responsible for future levee restoration projects.

"I agree with George (Shivery). We're in tight fiscal times right now," said Minor, who later added, "I would really hope that our legislators wouldn't put us in a situation where we would be responsible for such a large sum of money."

Sweeney and other officials have estimated the cost of rebuilding the entire levee, its six floodgates and its network of interior dikes at anywhere between \$10 million and \$30 million.

"This needs to be addressed by the county and/or the state," Shivery said. "There's too much at stake."

The levee system at present can handle a Category 1 hurricane -- the lowest level of classification by the National Weather Service -- with sustained winds of 74 to 95 mph accompanied by a 4- to 5-foot storm surge.

If the levees were to fail, about 400 to 500 properties would be immediately affected, as well as nearby rail lines, Interstate 295, petrochemical plants such as DuPont and Valero Energy, and a Superfund site on the Hercules Inc. property, said Chuck MacIntosh, special studies chief in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Philadelphia office. Saltwater would also intrude on water supplies.

"It's not just hurricanes," he said. "You can also get major rain events that happen as far north as New York that create another type of incidental flooding."

Since the county hosted a levee summit in late September, the corps funded \$60,000 of emergency repairs to the southernmost floodgate, which is near the Greenwich-Logan border, MacIntosh said. It also inspected the interior dikes, which are in some ways worse than the large levee, and issued a report about their condition to the county. A study to investigate the full extent of the levee's problems and exactly how many properties would be affected by its failure hasn't started because the project doesn't yet have a local sponsor, which would be responsible for half the study's cost, he said.

A local sponsor is needed because the Repaupo Meadow Co., which was formed by farmers to oversee the levee, is defunct. But there are considerable questions about what a local sponsorship would look like since so many communities depend on the levee.

Meanwhile, the southernmost floodgate still has serious problems and the levee, which doesn't meet current engineering standards, is lower than it should be.

Shivery understands the argument that the odds of the Delaware River breaching the levee are fairly low. But Shivery, a lifelong Greenwich resident, has seen it happen before and knows it's only a matter of time before it happens again.

"I don't want to gamble on people's lives," he said. "It's time to fix it. Someone needs to step up to the plate."

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